



Rich Versus Poor: Family Literacy in the Elementary Language Arts Curriculum

Rita Moore and Vicki Seeger

ABSTRACT

Two teachers challenge the rich versus poor metaphor which designates the school culture as superior to the home culture as they examine teachers' perceptions of how family literacy is represented in the elementary language arts curriculum.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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Transformative pedagogy develops through educational efforts in which people are encouraged to become knowledge producers, not knowledge receivers. (Spielman, 2001, p. 763)

Teachers often connect home and school literacies through an additive, not a transformative lens. Emphasizing family literacy and culture as a dynamic process (transformative) rather than as a fixed, insulated content (additive) (Erickson, 1990; Hancock, 2003; Nieto, 2002; Spielman, 2001) is a complex process. School climates are difficult to alter in any significant way unless teachers who are leaders guide other teachers and parents beyond the historical expectations of previously assigned roles of outsider versus insider, of rich versus poor.

In this writing, elementary teachers' perceptions of the representation of family literacy in the language arts curriculum of three K-6 schools are explored by two colleagues: Vicki, a fifth grade teacher at one of the schools, and Rita, a university professor. Eighteen teachers from grades K-6 in one suburban and two rural schools examined their practice for links to family literacy learning. The student population may be described as largely Caucasian with low to upper-middle socio-economic status. The schools are located just outside a large urban center.

Rich Versus Poor

The treatment of a child's personal, social, and cultural literacies within the school culture shapes the child's sense of belongingness and ultimately affects achievement (Christian & Bloome, 2005; Osterman, 2000). The literature suggests there is little evidence linking authentic home culture and literacy to school curriculum (Banks, 1991; Delpit, 1995; Marling & Paugh, 2005; Nieto, 2002). Teachers



often follow the “deficit” theory rather than the “wealth” theory in regard to the variety of literacy experiences children bring from their homes to the classroom (Linder & Foote, 2002). Student life experiences and life stories from which literacies develop both *affect* and *effect* learning (Gee, 2001b). For example in the world of reading: “Comprehension of written . . . language is as much about experience with the worlds of home, school, and work as it is about words” (Gee, 2001a, p. 714).

Family Literacy in the Language Arts Curriculum

Five statements focused a survey in which 18 teachers were asked first, to rank on a Likert Scale of one to five their perceptions of how family literacy and/or family practices were represented in the language arts curriculum. Please see Figure 1 for a brief description of the statements and a numerical summary of responses. Second, teachers were asked to provide curriculum examples supporting their responses. Since the sample size is small the lists of family literacy activities from the three schools are combined. These are in Figures 2 and 3. The response rate surveys was 100%.

Teachers’ Perceptions

To give us an overall picture, we asked the teachers to rank their perceptions of how well the language arts curriculum supported home literacy in their classrooms. Fourteen teachers showed confidence in ranking statement two (information sharing with parents). Sixteen (16) teachers showed confidence in ranking statement three (home to school learning connections, and statement five (understanding family literacy). In other words, the teachers did not perceive a lack of family literacy connections in the language arts curriculum as they knew them

Figure 1. Teachers’ Ranked Responses. Five is high and one is low. N=18

Survey Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1. Classroom environment reflects families and the community		7		4	7
2. Classroom provides information from school to home (newsletters, parent conferences, etc.)			4	6	8
3. Curriculum draws from home literacy utilizing home to school connections as learning resources.		2	2	6	8
4. I have expressed to or shown my preservice teacher the importance of home to school connections.	6	2	3	4	3
5. I have a good understanding of the backgrounds, issues, and family literacies of the children in my classroom.			2	9	7

The numbers in the boxes represent the number of respondents.



Family and school partnerships mean far more than sending home newsletters or encouraging parents to attend school events. While these are worthy practices, they fail to address the deeper issues integral to two different cultures: family and school. The teachers' responses revealed that much of the time the school culture was the authority--the dominant culture (Leland & Kasten, 2002). The image of rich versus poor prevailed which suggested the need to examine practices upon which partnerships rather than deficits could be built. There was a divide in how teachers perceived their actions in regard to including parents and families in the curriculum and what they actually did. Vicki examines this phenomenon through this example:

When a parent at one of the district schools began home schooling her son she was asked to come to a School Site Council meeting and explain the home schooling procedure. The parent made the comment that she could now understand why her child's teacher "does all those things for writing" such as brainstorming story ideas and expanding word choices. This comment caused me to reflect on my own lack of competence in informing parents about why we teach what we do in the classroom. The school climate almost promotes a sort of secrecy about what we do and why we do it.

Additive and Transformative Curriculum Examples

When asked to list as many examples from their classroom curriculum that they thought demonstrated connections to family literacy, the teachers created lists. Rita then categorized the lists as transformative or additive curriculum; counting the number of participants per category. In Figure 2, thirteen of the teachers listed one or more responses categorized as "additive," while in Figure 3 five teachers listed one or more responses categorized as transformative.

Figure 2. Additive Curriculum Examples. N=13 teachers

Send books home for students and parents to read
Tips for parents in newsletters
Send reading book home on week-ends with slip for parents to sign
Accelerated Reader books sent home nightly.
Parents sign a slip when the student is ready to test.
Sight word lists sent home for parents to help students learn.
E-mail events of the classroom to parents.
Hosting a "parent read aloud" day.
Send directions home to parents on how to edit the child's writing.
Reading contests for pizza
Asking parents to read and respond to children's writing
We discuss differences in home life and that it's okay to be different
Various business sponsored reading incentive programs
Volunteers, Parent Teacher Organization, Celebrations
Read-a-thon pledges for Christmas
Teacher generated newsletters to inform of upcoming events
Relate book situations with home situations
Parent teacher conferences
Grade cards

**Figure 3. Transformative Curriculum. N=5 teachers**

Family message journals
Writing about the history of their names (Why did your parents choose your name?)
Brainstorming topics from home life to write about in writing workshop
Interviewing parents, grandparents, and the residents of the community to learn about what schools were like when the interviewee attended our school.
Memoir writing that involved parent interviews
Listening to the Walls Talk: A Fourth Grade Study of Community History that may be viewed at: ["http://www.millennium.scps.k12.fl.us/wallsfocuskansas.html"](http://www.millennium.scps.k12.fl.us/wallsfocuskansas.html)
Student generated newsletters that elicit the writing and research interests of a wide variety of family members

The activities categorized as “additive” clearly carry the message that the school is the authority. There are tips for parents in newsletters and even discussions about how it’s “okay to be different,” however, the definition of different may originate from the viewpoint of the school culture. None of the activities transform the curriculum to first include family literacy practices, customs, or beliefs. For example, instead of talking about it’s “okay to be different,” first, focus on the kinds of people in their families and the kinds of things they read about and talk about at home.

Critical literacy may be taught using children’s literature to segue into sensitive home and cultural issues but it is important to remember that connections to personal experiences are what validates learning. Critical literacy raises awareness about equity and social justice as well as understanding one’s own personal and social literacy (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, in press). Children’s literature provides an excellent framework for examining family and cultural values (Hancock, 2003) within the language arts curriculum but it is not enough to examine someone else’s words. The classroom must provide spaces where home and school literacies conjoin. Dudley-Marling and Paugh (in press) explain:

In school settings, students often use written and oral language to infuse their personal, social, and cultural identities into the “official” curriculum” - what Dyson (1993) refers to as “staking a claim.” Interpreting texts through the lens of personal experience, drawing on their lives outside of school in their writing, and spontaneous “talk-around-the-edges” (Dudley-Marling & Searle, 1991) are among the means by which students “stake a claim” by inserting their social, linguistic, and cultural identities into the curriculum. (Dudley-Marling & Paugh, in press).

Under transformative curriculum, the family and community are an active presence in the curriculum. Neither are given a position of power over the other; both cultures are learning together. Consider this entry from a family message journal, (a shared writing between a second grade student and her mother). These message journals were used as reading texts in one of the second grade classrooms. (All names are pseudonyms.)



Dear Mommy,

My other family message journal has not any more space in it so I got a new one. It is very exciting writing in a new Family Message Journal. I am reading The Moonstone Castle Mystery right now. We are on the letters U and V in the cursive writing alphabet. We are making a quilt of what we did and liked doing in school!

Suzie

P.S.: please write a whole page if you can!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Dear Suzie

A quilt about school would be very interesting. I could do a very big quilt of all the things I like to do at work. I like to read cases that tell me about the law. Today, I read cases and statutes (Laws) to give Governor Gray advice on what he can do to fix the state's budget problems. If people don't agree to pay more taxes (dollars to the state) we will have to cut \$150 million out of the money that pays for schools. That is lots of money. Many schools will have to fire teachers, nurses, secretaries, and computer workers. I think this is a very bad idea.

When you grow up and finish college, I hope you find a job that you will enjoy as much as I enjoy my job. I love you.

Mom

In the next example Vicki explains how she expanded what had been a completely student generated classroom newsletter to include family members' participation and interest. The following excerpt highlights the importance of mediating family literacy with classroom curriculum to support the greatest number of learners:

The two students who are editors for the month enlist their parents to contribute an article. So far, we have had 100% participation, and the parents have decided what they will write about although the students sometimes make suggestions. After Mrs. Grace went to Scotland, the students wanted her to write a fictional account of what it was like to live in a castle. She was thrilled to do it, and had lots and lots of personal information from her trip. Mrs. Derby contributed an article about web sites, and you probably remember that she is our computer para [professional]. She knows exactly what we're doing in the classroom and noted web sites that had something to do with what we are studying.

This past month, Alice's dad contributed an article about Biff Henderson. It was an event that he attended, a subject (car racing) that he knows a great deal about, and he was excited about meeting a TV celebrity. Another thing: his wife was appalled at his first draft, so they went through the writing process at home!

The other article this past month was from David's mother. Their son, Geof, was diagnosed with diabetes when he was a 4th grade student with me. She really wants people to



understand the disease (and she is a school nurse paraprofessional). Then, David picked up on her idea and wrote about having a brother with diabetes. Anne and Taylor will be the next editors. Even though we won't write until the end of the month, they are both ready for ideas for their families.

Anne is going to interview her grandmother who is deaf about what it was like to grow up deaf. Anne and I took an American Sign Language class during the summer to learn sign language. Now she teaches the entire class sign language each day at the end of the day. Taylor is going to interview his dad when he goes to Oklahoma for Thanksgiving about what it's like to move around with your job.

Culture and Transformative Curriculum

Integral to success for teacher and learner is understanding what defines family culture and identity. It is not “quaint artifacts or isolated folklore” (Nieto, 2002, p.55) which pose the danger of defining cultural traits within school curriculum in isolation thus “fragmenting and trivializing our understanding of people’s lifeways as we freeze them outside time, outside a world of struggle in concrete history (Erickson, 1990, p. 23). The literature clearly denotes that literacy rituals of families are not perceived as contributors to literacy development; in general, they are overlooked (Bloome, Harris, & Ludlum, 1991; Nieto, 2002). One of the examples of transformative curriculum Vicki listed is creating a website, “Listening to the Walls Talk,” based on interviews with parents and community members about old buildings in the community in which the school was located. Rich local history came alive through these stories as her former 4th grade class members received a first person glimpse into the history of their community, not from textbooks, but from people they knew and trusted. The web address is listed in Figure 3.

Those with the greatest success in transforming the curriculum to reflect attitudes, language, and culture of all of the children are teachers who mediate curriculum issues through conversations with parents about the backgrounds, experiences, values, and expectations of the home culture (Spielman, 2001). These conversations take on the tenor of establishing relationships, rather than reporting data about levels of student achievement. This is particularly revealing with struggling readers and writers.

Teachers know a great deal about how children who struggle often devalue themselves as learners—what they “believe about schooling gets in the way of instruction” (Henson & Gilles, 2003). School is a place where they may not be successful, but home and community is a place where they can meet expectations in the rituals and routines of daily familiarity (2003). They know a lot about the environmental print of their surroundings and the daily events of their community. Bringing the home culture into the school culture begins to bridge the gap, leaving students feeling less alienated and in more familiar territory. Key to that process is changing what both the school culture (teachers) and the home culture (families) believe about each other’s role in the literacy development of children.

Discussion

Transformative curriculum is not cosmetic: it seeks to establish a critical understanding of culture and beliefs, ideas, customs, language, and ritual that define us as humans (Erikson, 1990). For example, differentiating instruction for multicultural understandings requires taking into account the home culture and language of the children as individuals rather than approaching the issue in a one size fits all fashion (Fisher, 2002; Leland & Kasten, 2002). Vicki explains:



Often, an educator's idea of differentiating instruction in a multicultural classroom consists of labeling classroom items bilingually and including literature from the students' cultures. While these are important to a classroom, they do not scratch the surface of becoming a classroom rich in multicultural understanding of the home.

Teacher preparation programs fail to prepare candidates to differentiate instruction through the acknowledgement and understanding of individual family backgrounds (Fisher, 2002; Barksdale-Ladd, Grisham, Richards, Fisher, Wuthrick, Hammons & Richmond, 1998; Linders & Foote, 2002). And, while curriculum standards or school improvement plan goals may include infusing family culture and literacy, the instructional approach remains largely additive (Linders & Foote, 2002). We believe that to understand the literacy development of others, teachers must be aware of students' funds of knowledge (Allen & Labbo, 2001, Moll, 1992). They must realize that teacher and family mediated learning is integral in developing transformative home and school connections and that the many additive kinds of activities that designated parents as outsiders and lesser authorities create unseen barriers for sharing and learning from one another.

Teachers as peer models for reform

During a recent discussion with another teacher from one of the two rural schools with whom we worked, we learned that in schools where teachers model the transformative approach to curriculum design, other teachers are likely to follow. For example, one of the most consistent examples of this kind of modeling was demonstrated with the use of Family Message Journals (Wollman-Bonilla, 2000) in all three of the schools in kindergarten and second grade. In the follow up discussion we learned that this family literacy and teaching strategy spread to other classrooms in the school. One teacher extended the project to include parent observation of the child's progress based on the child's goals and the parent's observations. The parents write:

Dear Ms. Simpson,

As you already know, we really love the family journal. We have so much fun writing back and forth to each other that we all forget it's a learning tool for her. We think the family journal has taught Debbie how to communicate through writing. Deb feels so comfortable with her writing that she often writes letters to her grandparents. We do think this journal is a great way to monitor her progress. We would like Debbie to focus a little more on her punctuation and for her to end her sentences instead of continuing her sentence with the word "and."

We look forward to every letter. Thanks for including it in the daily classroom activities.

Sincerely,

Ron and Susan Jackson

Modeling and leadership among teachers who understand how to transform curriculum to include family literacy may change the way their peers perceive the role of family literacy in the curriculum. According to one teacher's experiences as a teacher in quest of this model, "you have to try it



to feel its effects. It's like moving your kids into a comfort zone where they know a great many of the answers."

Concluding Thoughts

*Now I ask you what's your story?
and don't you tell me you don't
got one,
cause you do.
It just depends on how hard you look.*

(Alvarez, 2003, p. 290)

The passage from the above poem, *Life's Quilt*, was written by a fifth grade student, Lisa Alvarez who was searching for a place in an unfamiliar curriculum. Teachers may not understand the connections between how children acquire literacy both in and outside of the classroom (Allen & Labbo, 2001; Linder & Foote, 2002; McCaleb, 1997), but they will likely teach children whose literacy backgrounds, cultures, and communities are dissimilar to their own (Banks, 1993; Nieto, 2002). The stories we all have bridge learning to understanding. Teachers who connect learning to their students' backgrounds--to their life stories--are much more likely to be successful (Knapp, 1995; Spielman, 2001).

Transformative versus additive curriculum is a difficult paradigm for teachers to grasp but when you consider that everyone has a story to tell, then the metaphor of rich versus poor can change. We must change school climates and cultures steeped in the historical notion that the school's role is that of information giver to those perceived as less knowledgeable--the family. This pre-assigned role creates a barrier for teachers who might otherwise understand the vital connections between home and school literacy. Then, we begin to learn from each other's stories.

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